The House that Jill Built: A ReView of Feminist Approaches to Teaching Argument in the Composition Classroom

by

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Dedication

To the house my mother built; to all homes and builders.

Preface

Long before I was thrown into the RHE 306 classroom, I took a Composition Survey seminar in which I was introduced to some of the dominant issues and research in the field. As I heard seasoned AIs discuss their experiences in their rhetoric classroom and came to know the structure of RHE 306 and 309 through their experience of it, at some point, I had a gut feeling I couldn't shake—something about the teaching of this brand of rhetoric, of argument, felt like an anti-feminist activity. Not one to leave the gut un-interrogated, I determined to see if other feminists felt this way and why. I easily found other feminists in the literature who felt similarly, where advocating and implementing new methods and understandings of argument and rhetoric, but uncovering the why is/was more difficult. So as a sort of flotation device to assist you in your own woman-overboard experience of RHE 306, this MA report is what I have figured out so far.

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Abstract

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Congruent with the second wave of feminism and continuing into the 1990s, a group of feminist compositionists felt that argument should not have a major, if any, place in the feminist classroom and began to redefine, revision, and reposition argument. With a rhetorician's bias, this report looks at one articulation of why they turned away from argument—Sally Miller Gearhart's claim that "any intent to persuade is an act of violence"—, what they turned to, some critique surrounding their approaches and theories, and how a broader understanding of rhetoric and the role of agonism in rhetoric and education can add depth to the feminist approach.

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Introduction

I don't know what I was thinking the weekend I came home from college wearing a piece of muslin with the screen-printed words "no war in Iraq" tied around my bicep. I don't think I did it to rile my mother—although it could have been some form of latent teenage rebellion. And I don't think I did it mischievously, intending to incite uproar around the Limbaugh-loving dinner table. I think I wore it out of conviction, or at least out of relief that I finally had a conviction: a side that, after much deliberation, I was on.

"Deliberation" wasn't over, however. My mother argued passionately, emotionally, from what she saw as the truth, from deeply held values, the same values I hold. It is no exaggeration to say that at that moment she saw my position as betrayal and my armband as evidence of a failure on her part as a parent. My dad's role in the discussion/argument/conflict was more subdued, nearly entirely made up of factual interjections and clarifications: "Well, yes, but—" or "Now remember that—" or "Well, actually—". My younger sister stared in disbelief, then dismissed my armband and me as she does all things she deems too stupid to engage, and remained silent. My brother was enjoying the display and took part with gusto, arguing both sides alternatively. In the meantime, I escaped to the kitchen where my dad found me later. Although I was entirely shut down, he played the part of arbitrator, coaxing me back onto the common ground we shared. But I didn't go back to the table.

My house has always been a deliberative house. Our favorite and frequent pastime is discussing various issues, principles, and ideas. When my armband and I came home that weekend, I fully expected to share the reasons behind my conviction while sitting at the table—this wasn't the first serious or hot issue we'd discussed. I expected to

be vigorously challenged, but not blasted and excluded to the kitchen. The tradition of discourse, the environment of inquiry I trusted, the deliberative house around me collapsed, making the question about war in Iraq moot. At that moment, standing in the shambles, I began to wonder just what had happened to cause this collapse and how to prevent it. Was it simply my position that forced me into the kitchen? Are some issues just too hot? Or was it my form? How and where do we argue passionately from our principles, especially when we disagree, without excluding those who oppose us? What does that space look like in groups of different sizes and different degrees of solidarity: in homes, classrooms, communities, academia, politics, and between countries? How do we reinforce discourse and buttress inquiry into the structure of our deliberative spaces?

The answers to my litany of questions are not part of the scope of this paper but are rather part of a larger project I plan to pursue. These questions, however, are my driving force and function to move me forward in this project. I have no sufficiently narrow question here. I can, however, take my cue from Virginia Woolf[1] and "develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can the train of thought" which has led me to the half-answers and additional questions I now have (4). Or, in other words, to describe the view. Beginning at the moment of deliberative collapse of the house I grew up in, the place where I felt the safest and trusted the most, and following it through my experiences and anxiety as a grad student, I hope to articulate the perspective I have gained on argumentation, pedagogy, and feminism. Since my armband days, I have both shied away from argument and become fixated on it. As a teacher and student, I am

[1] [1] But, you may say, we asked you to write a Master's Report, an academic argument. Is it really necessary for me to quote Woolf, to use her introduction as a justification for my own style and insecurities here? I will try to explain. From my 3x5 cube that is the standard graduate-issue workspace, I sat down and attempted to dissect the model article I was given into an outline after which I could pattern my own paper. Like the narrator in *A Room of One's Own*, "I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback" (3), although it took me a little longer to articulate what I saw. Woolf's narrator can't deliver the product her audience expects. I can't deliver the expected product without compromising my content.

seeking to become something of a structural inspector determined to discover how to bring our deliberative houses up to code. And yet I keep one foot in the kitchen, bracing for the next collapse, hesitating to fully engage.

What follows is research and critique based on the assumption that elements of discourse, more specifically argument, are structurally unsound to some degree, some exposition on how it got there, how others have tried to reinforce it, a barely formed and speculative plan for a prop of my own, and a smattering of personal narrative for good measure[2].

A View from the Kitchen

> Rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment.
>
> —Cheryl Glenn, *Rhetorical Education in America*

As a feminist apologist, the irony of my place in the kitchen is not lost. Much of my time in grad school has been spent with one foot in the kitchen watching the table. Turns out, the kitchen is a room with a view. From my position, I have observed academic discourse around the seminar table, in lecture halls, in journals, and with my own students. As a composition enthusiast, this paper is an attempt to bring together these glimpses in a way that will help inform pedagogy, specifically within the composition classroom.

I began research from the perspective of a feminist graduate student in rhetoric who hadn't yet taught composition but was in a seminar that was a survey of composition. While sitting there listening to my peers discuss how an understanding of the rhetorical situation was a kind of panacea for some of the problems in composition,

[2] If the vagueness of my roadmap unsettles you, reader, feel free to refer back to the abstract for settlement.

my gut whispered to me something that turned out to be an echo of what other feminist compositionists felt almost a generation ago. Like Alexis Easley (and others), "I couldn't help feeling that the teaching of argumentative writing was basically an anti-feminist activity" (30). Yet, as my gut couldn't articulate how feminism and argumentative writing were in conflict, I turned to the research to answer this "how." Though not immediately satisfying, what I found was provocative.

A generation ago, 'provocative' perfectly describes Sally Miller Gearhart and her claim that "any intent to persuade is an act of violence" (195). Since its publication in 1979, this claim, the thesis of her article, "The Womanization of Rhetoric," resonated with a group of feminist compositionists teaching and writing in the 80s and early 90s, and, with her "indictment of our discipline of rhetoric," Gearhart seems to have lit a fire under these compositionists who understood argument as a form of persuasion. In general, those who cite Gearhart felt that argument in the form they knew it, an adversarial display where opponents perform their position in a fight to the win, should not have a major, if any, place in the feminist classroom. They began to redefine, revision, and reposition argument which begat invitational rhetoric, adaptations of Rogerian rhetoric, modifications of oral forms and of mediation techniques, as well as triage pedagogical strategies, among other efforts. All of these were an attempt to support feminist values and pedagogical principles, which they felt were degraded, marginalized, or silenced by traditional argument. The fire burned hot for a little over a decade, but has now all but gone out. It is an argument that needs sparking, despite the fact that those who oppose argument don't like to argue.

From my primary position as a student of rhetoric, however, my gut, although provoked, didn't resonate with Gearhart's claim as an answer for how argumentative writing and feminism seemed at odds. I had a broader view.

A Broader View: Some History of Rhetoric

> Persuasion is Aphrodite's daughter: it is she who beguiles our mortal hearts.
> —Saphho

Beginning with the Sophists, there has always been a varying degree of anxiety about this possibility of inherent violence in rhetoric. Gorgias, however, isn't too concerned and seems rather playful in his *Encomium of Helen* where he absolves Helen of Troy from any guilt in causing the Trojan War. One of his arguments here is the irresistible power of speech. In the section that represents a sort of hymn to the power of rhetoric, Gorgias compares the power of speech to a drug—

> For just as different drugs dispel different secretions from the body, and some bring an end to disease and others to life, so also in the case of speeches, some distress, others delight, some cause fear, others make the hearers bold, and some drug and bewitch the soul with a kind of evil persuasion. (46; par. 14)

—which is why Helen should be exonerated. Renaissance rhetors were also anxious about the "disturbing, mysterious, unstable, and potentially destructive reaction that the rhetor is able to provoke in others" (Rebhorn 83). For them, rhetoric is at least a temptress (178). Gearhart uses the term "conversion" to describe this metaphor of seduction. But Wayne Rebhorn points out that the abundant sexual language in the Renaissance discourse on rhetoric goes beyond seduction and is, "at least potentially, a most sinister and troubling affair" (158).

> [F]or if the orator's performance constitutes a violent, irresistible sexual penetration of the auditor, then that performance looks uncomfortably like rape. Indeed, the discourse resonates with the word itself, which appears in barely disguised form every time a vernacular writer speaks of *ravishment*, and more directly in Latin texts whenever one encounters the verb *rapere*. (158)

Seduction isn't sinister enough, as it is at least resistible and invokes a kind of pleasurable trickery, where rape[3], an emotionally loaded term, conjures an ugly violation. Gorgias, although with less concern, also summons this metaphor, "that Helen similarly, against her will, might have come under the influence of speech, just as if ravished by the force of the might (45; par. 12). Like Gearhart, Gorgias compares the "influence of speech" to "the force of the might," which shows up in Gearhart's essay in the terms "conquest," "invade," and "violate" (Gearhart 196). Surprisingly, I find the comparison of persuasion to rape more intellectually acceptable because it is both more accurate and more useful than the broader statement that all persuasion is violent and even makes salvageable the claim that persuasion can be violent. Besides fitting nicely with a feminist critique of argument—violence against women, be it sexually or linguistically—rape is a more specific and complex term. Rape is something great gone horribly wrong. The sex act, the physical mechanics, are not criminal in and of themselves, but culpability occurs when sex is used wielded with force like a weapon. It is possible that argument itself is not the problem, just as sex itself is not the problem. Instead, we look at the significant difference in each case, which for rape is force and consent. So while persuasion can be *like* rape, whether it *is* depends on the intent of the persuader, at least for Gearhart.

Thus the history of rhetoric provides some support for Gearhart's claim, or at least her anxiety. And, although my entire class of committed pedagogue peers in that composition survey class dismissed her and her article practically outright, and although Gearhart generated no more than five minutes of discussion among us in 2007 before we moved on to another article, and although there is much exaggerated language and a

[3] Even as I make the comparison, I begin to feel sick. I do not make the comparison lightly or to play on emotions. Intellectually, I know it is valid and furthers my understanding and possibly others, but having been close to an actual rape, I understand how even the word reproduces trauma. I apologize for the possible reactions to you, reader, because I know firsthand how unfathomably common rape still is.

distinct hippie accent which are much too easy to smile at ("it is only in density that the energy we generate in our minds or our psyches differs from our auras" (196)), and although her claims are dramatic ("the womanization of culture that I believe is necessary for the survival of the planet" (198)) and there are clear contradictions in her argument (for one, she is making an aggressive argument against aggressive argument), I think her argument deserves another look, another view. Not despite her extremism, but because of it. Not just because she caused so much discussion a few decades ago, but because Gearhart brought a new voice—a female and feminist one—to bear against the centuries-old male anxiety about rhetoric's potential inherent violence, a voice which was heard for a while and then drowned out, disparaged, or ignored. I don't think the conversation got its day. Or its day was too short.

In the section that follows, I hope to describe more specifically what Gearhart means by violence in order to explore what it was about Gearhart's article that resonated with such a large group of feminists. Eventually, I also hope to borrow and transform elements of Gearhart's critique into a new voice that articulates what my gut was trying to tell me: what is wrong with argument today.

A Lingering View

Gearhart sees rhetoric as salvageable only when it becomes disassociated with persuasion and aligned closer to communication. The 'womanization' in her title refers to this "fortunate shift in perspective" (195). Gearhart sees a continued need to move away from an androcentric view of the world. As Elizabeth Flynn describes it, "men have chronicled our historical narratives and defined our fields of inquiry" (425) without a female perspective. Gearhart locates the overt and overly male influence of rhetoric in its focus on persuasion and in the power it assumes a speaker has to change his audience. In

the discussion that follows, it is important to note that, for some, rhetoric is limited to a definition of persuasion and/or argument and does not include a broader concept of language or of persuasion. For them, the term cannot be recuperated, and it is not possible to designate appropriate or ethical uses of rhetoric.

As a rhetorician, Gearhart doesn't attack persuasion straight on; it's the intent to persuade, or the intent to change another, which she says the "patriarchs of rhetoric" have never questioned, that is so damaging. Or, as I see it, the distinction between sex and rape. Of course Gearhart wants change, or she'd have no reason to write her article. Change itself is not the issue: rather "the act of violence is in the *intention* to change another" (196). As I understand Gearhart, when within the speaker is an intention to change the audience, then the discourse issuing from the speaker constitutes an act of violence—traditional rhetoric. One can engage in discourse without this intention, and then the act becomes ethical—rhetoric as communication.

Much of the misinterpretation or outright dismissal of Gearhart can be attributed to the ambiguity within the word "intention." For example, "intent" has specific implications and functions in the legal field and the criminal world which are lost on the layperson. Those with a legal fluency, like Richard Fulkerson, among others, might find it difficult to reconcile Gearhart's use of the term with the legal implications of "intent." Although Gearhart does not explicitly discuss what she means by "intent," some inferences can be drawn from her description of the "conquest/conversion" model of discourse. For Gearhart, intent isn't just mildly hoping, or even vigorously wanting change. Intent is the single-minded resolve which precedes an action, that which will bring it to pass—the driving force. One may want change, as Gearhart herself does, but if one does so along the conquest model, by imposition and with force, then that desire to change becomes an intent to change, an act of violence.

According to Gearhart, the conquest/conversion model of human interaction is a "very male chauvinist model, one which not only implied but explicitly assumed that all the power was in the speaker, just as we believed at one point in history that all power was in the sperm" (199). Recognizing that there is at least equal power in the listener is a large part of Gearhart's project, a part which doesn't get much play in the literature perhaps because there is no catchy phrase and provocative indictment to encapsulate it. Imbuing both the speaker and listener with power is the beginning of dialogue, the form which Gearhart sees as necessary for saving the discipline of rhetoric. I would point out, though, that the listener, like the womb, has always had power whether history acknowledges it or not.

On the one hand, Gearhart wants to argue that the problem with rhetoric has been an undue focus on the speaker without acknowledging the autonomy of the listener. She wants to argue for the inherent power of the listener while at the same time describing a situation of violence which depends on the speaker being all-powerful. Her description of violence demonstrates a kind of complicity in dismissing the power of the listener as it reinscribes the powerlessness of the listener. It is robbing the listener of power that yields the real violence. Which brings us back to the history of rhetoric. The anxiety of Renaissance rhetors comes from the assumption that Gearhart describes: a powerless audience, a defenseless and ripe victim for the penetrating assault of the rhetor. In such a situation persuasion becomes manipulation, propaganda masquerading as eloquence.

Similarly, conquest and conversion are not part of the same model, at least not according to my understanding of conversion with my particular religious orientation. While conquest is a clear misuse of power by the speaker, conversion imbues the listener with a power that Gearhart says traditional rhetoric has repudiated. The kind of conversion I have experienced and observed is aligned with Middle English origins of the

word, connoting a "turning" and a transformation, a self-motivated change. This kind of understanding of conversion is exactly congruent with the way Gearhart describes ethical rhetoric and ethical change because it routes power to the listener. And yet, recalling Gearhart's procreative reference—it takes two. Both speaker and listener should share responsibility in the persuasion. The persuaded is complicit in the persuasion as is the persuader.

On the other hand, traditional rhetoric has had an undue focus on the potential power of the speaker, and I believe this emphasis does cause violence. I am persuaded by the way Gearhart recalls that the old cliché that "the pen is mightier than the sword" is built on the comparison that both pen and sword are tools capable of being used for the same end. Whether with "whips or rifles," or with rhetoric's "language and metalanguage, with refined functions of the mind," a weapon is a weapon, and rhetoric is "not excuse[d] from the mindset of the violent" (195). I would add that anything can be a tool for violence and recall a more recent cliché (if you can call a bumper sticker a cliché): "guns don't kill people, people kill people." The focus needs to shift from potential weapons to those who wield them. Thus, Gearhart doesn't attack the tools of rhetoric but rather advocates a change in our use of those tools, which I emphatically support. At the same time, Gearhart cautions: "*Yet where the intent is to change another*, the difference between a persuasive metaphor and a violent artillery attack is obscure and certainly one of degree rather than kind [emphasis added]" (197). Weapons can cause violence, different weapons can cause violence to different degrees.

To that end, Gearhart attempts to imagine a different model of rhetoric and communication, one which is less invasive and penetrative in the patriarchal sense and more feminine and feminist in that it is inviting, drawing out, and womb-like. She describes the role of rhetoricians as creators of an environment for change where the

change is self-motivated. This is the only ethical way Gearhart sees that a rhetor of integrity can bring about change. Gearhart boldly articulates a position which still has merit, as it is shortsighted to think that a wave or two of feminism is enough to "womanize" any field, especially one as old and as reverent of the past as rhetoric. With revolutionary-style vigor, her article is a picket-line chant outside the patriarchal tower. Those inside see her as a contradictory crazy extremist—like one who bombs an abortion clinic in the name of the "sanctity of life"—as she argues violently against violence[4]. It is her form that critics so quickly attack so they can dismiss her extreme claims without fully engaging, without listening. They do not hear the depth, the point of her extremism, and thus rob her of the power she claims speakers can wield in a kind of rhetorical emasculation.

No question, there are valid critiques to bring to bear against Gearhart. Their validity, however, should be based first on the sharpness of the ear listening to her argument and not solely on the sharpness of the pen used to counter it. There are two valid critiques and pertinent segues made by Susan Jarratt in "The Case for Conflict." She notes that, first, the "problems with Gearhart's proposal arise in the details of the communication context she envisions" (107), details which Foss, Foss, and Griffin directly attempt to fill in with their Invitational Rhetoric and which other feminists attempt to address in their pedagogical strategies discussed below. But, besides being vague, Gearhart "fails to anticipate the emergence of differences among groups" in her

[4] I have been appalled, and thus probably defensive, as I have read some shallow critiques, another kind of violence, of Gearhart by scholars I had previously thought of as composition giants. From them, she receives no benefit of the doubt in her choice and mastery of a classic style, for crafting such a controversial and abrasive (as in polishing and cleaning) thesis and little credit for the rethinking it caused. It has caused me to be more skeptical of other's reviews and more committed to listening and has had a large influence on the outcome of this project.

idealism that women can heal the world and make it a better place, putting women on that same problematic pedestal (108). In their history, both rhetoric and feminism have often been utopic to a fault. In this case, the fault is assuming the victim is innocent and superior to the oppressor, which then has the potential to become replacing the patriarchy with a feminarchy. As recent case law shows, women can now be guilty of rape, too. Rather than describe the charge of essentialism so prevalent and threatening to the credibility of these feminist's projects, I'm simply going to mention here that it exists and move on. From my perspective, the cry of essentialism, while valid, has been sounded too loud and long and is drowning out the voices I want to be heard here.

Womb with a View

> Feminism is an ideology of change which [sic] rises out of the experiences of women, out of the experiences of our bodies, our experiences of our conditioning both in our individual lives and over the centuries.
>
> —Sally Miller Gearhart, "The Womanization of Rhetoric"

More or less united under the above definition of feminism, a group of "cultural feminists" were directly influenced by Gearhart despite the confrontational delivery of her message. A brand of feminism which Elizabeth Flynn describes as promoting "'women's ways,' ways which often result from women's biological and social roles" (qtd in Graves 6), these cultural feminists ascribe to a pedagogy which feels itself fundamentally in conflict with patriarchal discourse, including argument. A large group—probably proportionally related to the number of composition programs which privileged an expressivist approach—of these feminists concerned themselves with what writing outside the patriarchal tradition, or writing as women, might look like. The site of this revision was often experimental writing classes for women (Annas, Osborn, Daümer

and Runzo, among others) which explored forms beyond argument. A smaller group took issue with traditional argument. That forming an argument or teaching how to do so constitutes an "intent to change" and thus an "act of violence" was so self-evident, many feminists didn't bother to articulate the connection. It was enough to cite Gearhart and move on to a solution.

According to these feminists, argument is problematic when it is adversarial, monologic, patriarchal, masculine, antagonistic, combative, hierarchical, polarized, inauthentic, and competitive—meaning a goal of winning. Instead of an argument which silences, degrades, alienates, excludes, lectures, and passes judgment and imposes a hierarchy of ideas or values, they want a discourse form which encourages questions and the tentative exploration of ideas, cultivates a desire to understand, and supports inclusion, cooperation, and dialogue. In general, the kind of discourse form they are striving for comes out of feminist values and pedagogical goals rather than rhetoric or argumentation theory. Since, according to the editors of *Feminism and Composition*, "inclusion is one of the central feminist projects" (Kirsch et al. 10), traditional argument and the conflict it can bring lies outside of the scope of feminism when it alienates and excludes. For many cultural feminists, the classroom should be a nurturing environment, devoted to collaboration, cooperation, and empathy (Graves 6). With this objective in the foreground, many creative pedagogical approaches developed.

In 2005, Kathleen Hunzer's article, "Diversifying Our Views of Argument: Dialogue, Respect, and Feminist Rhetoric," provides a distillation of this perspective. Synthesizing the work of those who have gone before, Hunzer's recent work, the only one I've found, is a representative example of this kind of approach, which I'll call practical. With an emphasis on addressing the problem of argument in the trenches of the classroom and the academic world, Hunzer, like the other practical compositionists,

identifies a feminist pedagogical goal and then develops ways to achieve it in her classroom. For example, the values of community and the privileging of dialogue over monologue, derived from Gearhart, result in Hunzer's goal to create a dialogic community. To do this, she requires everyone to sit in a semi-circle, structures the syllabus around questions instead of topics, and sets up a digital discussion board. In the process, Hunzer believes she is able to revise argument. The bulk of her article is spent in outlining feminist pedagogical goals and describing how to achieve them, with the standard theory section, a "non exhaustive summary," playing a minor role.

Others, like Catherine Lamb, couch their approach more explicitly in theory. For Lamb in "Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition," it is a feminist theory of power which leads her to "suggest a means by which [feminist composition can] include an approach to argument, ways to proceed if one is in conflict with one's audience" (11). Lamb still uses argument in her classroom; however, it is not the end product but rather a beginner step to help students articulate their position. The end Lamb comes up with is an adaptation of the oral forms of mediation and negotiation to the composition classroom—students work in groups to mediate or negotiate a solution to the problem they have been researching. But the forms are meaningless without the knowledge that "the forms are expressions of writer/reader relationships which reflect an understanding of power consistent with feminist values," the same kind of ethical power relationship Gearhart champions (22). Lamb doesn't present mediation and negotiation as "The Answer" to the problem of patriarchal discourse. Rather, she sees them as a solution that works now and may prove to be no more than provisional. With use, "the forms themselves will change to mirror our evolving understanding of what we are constructing" (22).

Throughout her essays (1991-2002), Lamb continues to talk about an idea of spaciousness in discourse, "how to enter that space and keep it open, developing a sense

of spaciousness in the resolution of the conflict" ("Voices" 156). A spacious discourse is one which does not exclude keeping everyone within and engaged in the space of discourse or, in my terms, staying seated at the table. In "Beyond Argument," Lamb describes how traditional or monologic argument, as "a mode in which one's goal is to persuade another to one's point of view," is also a crossroads. It can change the ethical power dynamic and close that space when "what we want comes first, and we use the available means of persuasion to get it" ("Beyond" 13). Although she cites Gearhart and is personally sympathetic to the force and violence contained in much discourse, Lamb has no categorical problem with persuasion in the broadest sense. For Lamb, violence occurs "only if any invitation to redefine oneself is seen as invasive" ("Voices" 164). Lamb's pedagogy seeks a use of power which is consistent with the feminist value of interconnectedness, and mediation is one discourse form which supports that. She sees mediation as changing "the conception of power … from something that can be possessed and used on somebody to something that is available to both and has at least the potential of being used for the benefit of both" ("Beyond" 18). Like sex.

In the 1991 article, "Beyond Argument," unity and the resolution of conflict get foregrounded, something she recognizes in her 2002 article, "Other Voices, Different Parties: Feminist Responses to Argument," in that "advocating mediation or negotiation may also be seen as an emphasis on coming to closure" ("Voices" 159). Her chosen form, mediation, pursues a different goal than monologic argument. Instead of the goal to win that Lamb associates with traditional argument and persuasion, mediation privileges agreement, seeking to arrive at a solution acceptable to all sides. As her thinking and practice progresses, Lamb begins to address the potential harm "an artificial emphasis on finding a solution at the expense of really exploring the nature of the conflicts involved"

can cause ("Voices" 159). From here it is easy to see how this anti-argument sentiment becomes dangerous when it progresses to a position which is anti-conflict.

The initial focus of feminists, or at least cultural feminists, was on developing a personal voice, which coincided with ignoring conflict, defined as disagreement, and describes the sense of heightened idealism ("Voices" 156). In Lamb's later work, she is interested in ways of responding to conflict, where previously she was centered on making it all go away (mediation and negotiation). It's not the "male mode" of responding to conflict but the goal to win an argument that makes "confrontation virtually inevitable" ("Voices" 157). Confrontation changes the power relationship into one that breaks down interconnectedness, becomes power-over instead of a subject-subject relationship, and narrows the spaciousness that is essential for ethical and inclusive discourse ("Voices" 158).

Instead of confrontation and as a supplement to mediation, Lamb then introduces the barest idea of another tool with a lot of potential for dealing with conflict and widening the discourse space—response, similar to Gearhart's vague discussion of listening and creating an environment of change. When one is "responding," it is not important to take an "explicit position; the emphasis instead is on broadening the context in which the discussion takes place, creating openings" between poles, allowing for a whole spectrum of positions to exist within the conversation ("Voices" 163). What rises to the foreground is a commitment that the conversation continue instead of the speaker's position or performance or even resolution of the conflict itself. The advanced skill required to effectively function as a responder in the way that Lamb describes might not fit within the scope of the basic composition class, but it is related to the approach of Alexis Easley.

While many attempted to discover, through a flourishing of women's writing and a feminine or feminist style, an alternative or a revision of traditional argument as a discourse form, and some imagined what might replace argument, Alexis Easley offers another approach to deal with this "contradiction between teaching argumentation and feminist pedagogy" (30). Simple and unexpected, Easley's approach advocates not trying to resolve the contradiction but instead presenting "the conflict to our students as a *conflict*" (30) and then cultivate the self-consciousness and reflective skills needed to understand it as such. While I initially saw Easley's approach as a kind of copout, as I have listened closer to her argument, I have seen the power in the simplicity of her approach.

First of all, Easley embraces what many other feminists shy away from—conflict—and uses it as a teaching moment. She does see argumentation as masculine and potentially problematic, but also understands the important role it plays in gaining access. Easley says that clear, forceful argumentation is an important skill "in order [for students] to become full participants in their academic discourse," especially for women (30). But she also teaches them "to have a more ethical self-awareness and responsibility in their argumentative practice" (30). In doing so, Easley is beginning the process of "changing the use of our own tools" that Gearhart advocates (196), and she does this through creating dialogue about the "conflict encounter" (Gearhart 198). It is the conflict between feminism and the teaching of argumentative writing that Easley uses to encourage reflectiveness. Easley may be an unwitting rhetorician.

Her first step to teaching students argumentative writing is to have them discover the rules across disciplines, which they research cooperatively. Then she asks them to "examine the sorts of metaphors, structures, and assumptions used across the disciplines and discuss what sorts of cultural values and ethics they inscribe" (34). By introducing

readings, having students write reflectively about them, and then discussing and analyzing them in class, students begin to see and then are able to "question the underlying assumptions of all forms of argumentation" so that they can become "more self-conscious in their appropriation of the rhetorical conventions of academic and professional discourse communities" (35). Basically, Easley is teaching her students rhetoric—that academic writing is located within a rhetorical situation, which, it turns out, is a kind of panacea to many of the problems within composition, as long as it is ethically situated. Such self-consciousness that is a component of rhetoric provides a kind of critical distance to an issue that can keep the discourse space open or keep us seated at the table whether we agree or not.

The Case for Conflict

The more I have researched and thought about the concepts and ideas that arise in the juncture of feminism, argumentation, and pedagogy, the less need I have felt to discuss conflict. The better I get at listening to what certain of these feminists are saying, the clearer I see that the case for conflict has already been won. The point of clarification that still needs to be made is what *kind* of conflict we are talking about. Some of those who are wary of feminist approaches seem to simplify what feminists are doing as eschewing all conflict—both the conflict that naturally arises from diversity as well as the kind of conflict that is engaged in like battle. We can be in conflict and be engaged without waging a war, even if it is just with words. And yet, according to the literature, there are those among feminist and process pedagogues who in their zeal for collaboration also conflated these meanings of conflict.

In Susan Jarratt's essay, "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict," she outlines several unsettling incidents that surfaced because of an overly accepting classroom climate that shunned conflict. Jarratt argues that such an approach leaves "those who adopt it insufficiently prepared to negotiate the oppressive discourses of racism, sexism, and classism surfacing in the composition classroom" (106). In our society, this kind of pedagogy can actually further marginalize women and other minorities in the call for unity and solidarity. Bill Karis, responding to the general trend toward collaboration in composition classrooms in the late 1980s, cautions: "to the extent that this privileging of compromise effectively limits free and open dialogue among collaborators, this inclination toward compromise is damaging," particularly when unity is emphasized at the beginning of the collaborative process (114). It turns out that collaboration as well as conflict can narrow the spaciousness in discourse that Lamb advocates, and for Easley, it can undermine our pedagogy. The "greatest barrier to learning in college classrooms" is most often "peaceful acquiescence, not violent combativeness" (Easley 35). Jarratt says that this ideal and false unity can result in "a superficial suturing of real social divisions" (110). And Mary Ellen Dakin, a secondary education teacher writing in *English Journal* eloquently puts it,

> I have learned more from discord than from harmony. When discord speaks in measured cadence … I hear notes I missed on my own. Yet even when it has shouted in my face and called me names, discord has taught me to clarify my thinking, to defend my beliefs, and to speak truth to power. (12)

I admire Dakin's relationship with discord, and yet I don't think it's universal. I seek to replicate it in myself and in my students, but I don't want to neglect the learning opportunities in harmony. Discord or conflict, like harmony or unity, are not vehicles for learning. They are each just different kinds of fuel burning at different temperatures.

A View from the Parlor

I felt the heat my first semester in grad school; it was worse than an intellectual hazing. One seminar stands out as being particularly scorching. On the first day of class, the professor told us he wanted us to run the discussion. "Contradict each other, tell her she's wrong, tell him he's an idiot if he thinks that, really be engaged. Shout at each other." To this professor, the deliberative space of a seminar was one where we were at each other's throats. For him, that equated active participation. I imagine he was describing in his own way what Kenneth Burke in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* describes below:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment, or the gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110–111)

The discussion in both my seminar and the parlor is uncomfortably hot. It also uses terms that recall combat: "opponent," "ally," "coming to your defense," and "aligns against you" which seem at odds with the civil setting of the metaphor—a parlor. Although the conversation is vigorous and engaging, there is no mention of action or practice: just continuous discussion. This is a mode to which cultural feminists would object and what Lamb and others categorize as adversarial. But the approach also descends from a deeply rooted tradition initially introduced to me by Walter J. Ong described as agonism.

In his 1982 "Orality and Literacy," Ong attaches the Greek word 'agon' to 'a contest' (110–111). In *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciouness*, Ong goes to great lengths to specifically identify what he means by contest. It's kind of like contention, but not; similar to competition, but not. It has elements of conflict, but more. Contest is

> a struggle, earnest, possibly but not at all necessarily lethal or even unfriendly, between […] human beings, entered into to determine dominance of one or another sort. The dominance cn be purely ludic, as in a game of amateur sport, or existentially real, as in a lawcase or in war. (44–45).

Ong's contest can contain any degree of antagonism between participants as long as the participants are earnestly engaged. The function of this struggle is to determine dominance, which has a ceremonial component manifested in either real stakes or, in their absence, an assumed ludic attitude.

Ludic or real, ceremonial or not, dominance is an easy and natural target for not just the feminist. In Ong's basic definition we already see the seeds of what feminists protest in argument: hierarchy, adversarial, a goal of winning. On the one hand, the goal of dominance would seem to narrow argument and close down the discourse space. And yet, at least for Ong, the goal of dominance seems to open it. It may be that the ceremonial stance may function to diffuse to some degree the dominance or provide distance between competitors—"it's not personal, it's just business"—creating space for growth. Ong points to the development and flourishing of the university system as evidence for the success of agonism as he believes contest has functioned "more or less directly to shape the noetic world itself, and specifically its academic development" (28).

According to Ong, "contest has been a major factor in organic evolution and it turns out to have been a major, and indeed seemingly essential, factor in intellectual development" (28). Contest "generates intellectual structures, the structures that make

science itself "(47). While there is some validity in the idea that intellectual structures are born out of struggle, Ong becomes more than problematic when he basically denies women participation to contest on biological grounds. We aren't aggressive enough to engage in contest. "A mother seems to absorb aggression …. Anatomically males are not fitted for this creative absorption [intercourse] of aggression and its transformation into life [pregnancy]" (40–41). Men, therefore, take their aggression and create intellectual structures. Women take men's aggression and create biological structures. Although Ong does admit that women do think, and even read, he still excludes them biologically from real participation in contest.

Coming back to the first word of Ong's definition of agonism, "struggle," is, for me, what is salvageable and worth saving from his sociobiological treatise. That one word has more in common and in cause with others who also provide definitions of agonism; as Debra Hawhee points out in her article "Agonism and Aretê" "the *agôn* is more than the one-on-one sparring which is emphasized in most treatments of the topic" (185). There are understandings of agonism that are not so dependent on the problematic idea of dominance and that can enrich the practice of argument in any classroom. And women can struggle, too.

Hawhee[5] extends agonism beyond a synonym for competition and detaches it from the goal to win by introducing another Greek word, *athlios,* which was used for outcome-driven competition or when contending for a prize (185). "Whereas *athlios* emphasizes the prize and hence the victor, *agôn* emphasizes the event of the gathering

[5] I do not yet read Greek, and I will never be a classicist. What is important in the following paragraphs is not historicity or the authority of those I cite or the validity of their interpretations because I'm not qualified to evaluate those. I can, however, see the potential to transform the terms into the basis for another understanding of feminist pedagogy.

itself—the encounter rather than the division between the opposite sides" (185–186). Such a distinction narrows agonism to this idea of struggle, the moment or process or "movement through struggle … wherein subjective production takes place through the encounter itself" (186). The idea that struggle is productive echoes Ong's description of how contest develops intellectual structures, and it does so without recalling dominance. It might be too much to add how nicely the idea of gathering, and the community and interconnectedness it connotes, fits within feminist principles. Either way, it seems possible to divorce agonism from domination and perhaps allow a paradigm where agonism and cooperation are on the same side.

In 1997, and without invoking feminist frames, Lynch, Cooper, and George attempted just that in their article "Moments of Argument: Agonistic Inquiry and Confrontational Cooperation." In a field enamored with cooperation, Lynch et al. began to wonder if "the whole point of argumentation is being lost in our talk about cooperation and collaboration, that we are losing the value of challenging, opposing, and resisting" (63). They want to find a way to cash in on what struggle has to offer without bankrupting the assets of cooperation. They "want to see argument as agonistic inquiry or as confrontational cooperation, a process in which people struggle over interpretations together, deliberate on the nature of the issues that face them, and articulate and rearticulate their positions in history, culture, and circumstance" (63). They want to have their cake and eat it, too. And they seem to accomplish it. The one small snag is that, while not avoiding argument, their students' writing did not always look like argument but did look more like analysis. They seem to successfully negotiate "the threat of struggle" which "always carries with it the reflex action of retrenchment, a retreat back into isolation and defended difference," (68) a fall back to the "narrowness and simplicity" of traditional debate (64). They contain the fear and risk by deemphasizing it

and by cultivating an attitude that sees argumentation as a social, connecting activity rather than an aggressive agonistic one (68). It appears their students achieve what Bill Karis calls for, that "they should engage in free and open dialectic, recognizing that *substantive* conflict is collaboration too" (124).

A hallmark of their courses is delaying, as much as possible, their students' rush to take sides and dig into a position. They are wary of the empty pro-con argumentation modeled in "the incredible poverty of political discourse in which we are awash," (Jarratt, "Reflections" 343) and recognize, as Evelyn Westbrook's research shows, that an "overemphasis on conflict and pro-con argumentation urges students to adopt simplified positions and encourages eristic debate at the expense of inquiry" (Westbrook 341). Westbrook analyzed the 1842-1847 archives of the Clariosophic Society of South Carolina College, a student-run literary and debate society, to see if pro-con argumentation impacted their beliefs. Voting to decide the question at the end of the debate indicated no change. Society members' journals demonstrated members didn't even consider changing. Her conclusions are a challenge to "the two claims critical pedagogues often make—that agonistic debate challenges both dominant ideologies and students' beliefs" (340).

Perhaps the most common experience of agonism today within the composition classroom is a feeble incarnation of pro-con argumentation, which, in a less than ludic way, sets up contestants in a pithy squabble for dominance. Such an encounter makes a mock of the ceremony so important to Ong, strips struggle of the power to produce anything, reinscribes students' already held beliefs or worse, bores them to death, and makes grading position papers painful grading for composition teachers. My experience of pro-con argumentation leads me to offer two pros to the long list of cons. First, it provides another side to the issue for those who only see one side. Second, it sets up

conditions where a productive struggle is at least possible. Beyond that, however, I have yet to discover the potential empowerment Thomas Sloane discusses in the introduction of his book, *On the Contrary: The Protocol of Traditional Rhetoric*[6]. For Sloane, pro-con argumentation is central to understanding rhetoric and how to think like a rhetorician (3). Also, "from a development point of view, learning to argue may be a crucial phase in learning to think" (6). But where pro-con argumentation leads to ignoring ambiguity and a simplification of complexity, the kind of thinking it teaches is not deep or desirable.

Agonism in Education

Many of the scholars discussed above have noted the central place agonism has had in education, although, in the case of Ong and Hawhee, I suspect the marks of agonism are different. Hawhee tells us that "the Greeks produced themselves through active struggle; their pedagogy depended on agonism" (186). Feminist compositionist Susan Osborn describes Ong's perspective better than I want to: "traditional rhetoric developed in the past as an expression on the 'rational level' of 'ceremonial combat'" and that rhetoric, education in rhetoric, and all education has "focused on defending a position (thesis) or attacking the position of another person" (259). In his *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, Robert J. Connors describes rhetoric's agonistic legacy in less specific terms. "Classical rhetoric is, plain and simple, about fighting, ritual fighting with words, and this agonistic tone carried over into all rhetorical study up until the nineteenth century" (27) when women entered college. Connors seems to support Gearhart's indictment of the inherent violence of rhetoric. The difference is

[6] Of course, I haven't finished the book. I'm excited to be persuaded by him.

that Connor, and Ong for that matter, praise the violence because it is ritualized and noetic.

Despite Connor's claim that the entrance of women into college, which "changed the most basic rhetorical rules of engagement, and from cold, distanced, demanding lecture-recitation teaching and agonistic competition, rhetoric after 1900 became at its most typical a personalized editorial relationship, critical but not usually antagonistic" agonism is still with us (44). Osborn, like most other feminist pedagogues, point to contemporary textbooks that still teach students to take an adversarial posture, declare an opponent, and attack. Connors mourns the fall of agonism in our educational institutions. And it's all women's fault. I, however, mourn that it, like rhetoric, often exists for our students as a wan and mute straw man.

In some ways, agonism and argument are identical twins—one gets confused for the other when they are distinct, though similar, entities. It is possible that the violence feminists responded to after Gearhart's clarion call was a case of mistaken identity. Agonism, when coupled with dominance as in Ong's definition, can support much of the blame for what often goes wrong with argument. The feminist project of re-visioning argument must first wipe agonism out of its eyes. Agonism, however, has much potential to be renewed, and, for Sloane, when correctly understood, we focus in on the promise of struggle. Sloane argues that rhetoricians like Erasmus, while appearing to be eristic in their use of pro-con argumentation, did not seek to perpetuate the conditions of antagonism and strife: "they sought, rather, to serve as midwives, to assist the readers to give birth to ideas in their own heads" (4).

Another Womb with a View: Argument as Maieutic

> Many modern educationists will dislike the view of rhetoric I offer. For it is ostensibly based on antagonism, hostility, strife, competitiveness, indeed all those objectionably male-oriented qualities modern education is seeking to 'go beyond.' When skillfully applied, I shall argue, rhetoric too actually seeks to go beyond those qualities. For rhetoric at certain points abandons antagonism and enters into an intellectual process that the rhetoric-hater Socrates calls maieutic, midwifery, a role women have traditionally performed.
>
> —Thomas O. Sloane, *On the Contrary*

The day this report is submitted and I fulfill the last requirement to receive my Masters will mark the one-year anniversary that I received another hard-won title—that of mother. Contractions began at 37 weeks and didn't climax to active labor until the end of week 42. Once I entered active labor, I dwelt in it for 27 hours, the first 14 hours more than manageable with the preparations I had made and the support of my husband and midwife. When I stalled out at seven centimeters and failed to progress for ten hours, I began to understand what struggle meant. When I hit transition, I doubted my body's ability to do anything but explode or die. Pushing was forcefully quick and when, in the dim light, I first locked eyes with my baby, I was stunned. My daughter's birth was the most profound and beautiful thing that I have ever experienced.

Besides dramatizing struggle, I describe this sacred and yet common experience because I know that, in today's society, it is not common to feel so sweetly about labor and delivery (or about midwives). The birth of a child is as much agony (also from the Greek *agon)* as it is miracle. Learning should be hard—a struggle in the best most productive sense of the word. Teaching as midwifery offers another metaphor for women teachers that doesn't have the problems of the mother metaphor or doctor metaphor. Our role is to help our students birth their own ideas. In this situation, struggle does not mean positioning one student or viewpoint against another. It also adds another understanding

of force that isn't power-over but power-with and supports the notion that rushing to choose a position or side is pre-mature. The maieutic metaphor is one that I, as a feminist compositionist, see as potentially transformative. It is a feminist approach to agonism. It is the topic of my next paper.

In ReView

> There is a Truth and Beauty in Rhetorick; but it oftener serves ill Turns than good ones.
>
> —William Penn

For me, understanding agonism deepens and more specifically addresses the problems in the parlor which Catherine Lamb also addresses. Her critique of the parlor goes beyond concerns about adversativeness.

> The "you" in it takes it for granted that he is invited and can enter the parlor; he also seems to have no doubts about being able to speak, using the proper forms, and being listened to once he speaks. His challenges are only those of timing and strategy. I, on the other hand, ask who has been invited and who has been left out. Why should only these forms be used and not others? Must we assume an antagonistic relationship between participants? What other parties can we imagine that might continue the conversation? ("Voices" 155).

As an undergraduate, I did not doubt my ability to speak, but I was frustrated with "the proper forms." My desire to teach writing sprouted out of my frustration with TAs and professors who would penalize me for deviating from accepted forms, like not following the five-paragraph model (in an honor's class!). As a result, it became my goal to reject formal rules such as never stating my thesis and still "being listened to" (which usually meant getting an A). Now as a graduate student, I do question my ability to speak after hazing seminar experiences that assumed "an antagonistic relationship between participants." And I, as a student of rhetoric, continue to investigate challenges of "timing

and strategy" while I imagine with Lamb and others how this conversation, in form, tenor, and space, might continue differently.

While I have seen much violence in discourse and education, unlike Gearhart, I have never seen persuasion as the important function of rhetoric. My reason for wanting to teach rhetoric was never an "attempt to educate others in that skill [of changing others]" (196). I always saw rhetoric as a deconstructive lens—as a faculty cultivated to help in cutting through crap. And crap is always violent.

The feminists I have reviewed provide different answers to my opening question: "How do we reinforce discourse and buttress inquiry into the structure of our deliberative spaces?" For Jarratt, the answer is "a more rhetorical composition theory" ("Conflict" 112). She would probably agree with Sloane and me that "we have not fully recovered the educational richness, or for that matter the humanity, of the rhetorical tradition" (Sloane 4). Like Karis, Jarratt and I feel the problem isn't with changing the use of our tools but rather neglecting them. Karis argues that we need to "employ the entire range of tools at their disposal and not be coopted [sic] by calls or directives privileging cooperation and unity" (124). Although I would add we can equally be co-opted by calls for contest and dominance. Alexis Easley's answer is to teach self-consciousness and reflectiveness in the wielding of our tools, or a rhetorical awareness that has the potential to salvage traditional argument and transform beyond the model of the "media wasteland" (Jarratt, "Reflections" 343). Catherine Lamb argues for forms that reflect ethical power relationships that function to keep the discoursive space, the space at the table, open regardless of whether or not we agree. In the end, I come back to the feminist project of inclusion. The integrity of our deliberative houses is measured by the degree to which arguers remain engaged and seated at the table.

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Vita

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